

## Rebuilding Kirkuk one office at a time, one day at a time

Story and photos

By Sgt. 1<sup>st</sup> Class Todd Oliver

SETAF Public Affairs

It's a massive undertaking by anyone's estimation. It's a city on the verge of chaos, its utilities functioning only part of the time, its bureaucracy dismantled. Rebuilding a city's government, office-by-office, record-by-record, person-by-person, including restoring the basic community services—water, electricity, police and fire protection—a difficult task for each service separately, can seem insurmountable when combined.

Throw into the mix different ethnic, political and religious groups, each vying for power at the expense of the others, and the end result could (and often does) end up tragically.

While far from a normal, healthy, functioning city, life in Kirkuk, which has roughly the population of Denver, seems to be slowly returning to normal, with the help from soldiers of the 173<sup>rd</sup> Airborne Brigade.

A significant step in that direction was taken when Col. William Mayville, 173<sup>rd</sup> Abn Bde commander, reopened the city's main government building during a ribbon-cutting ceremony May 3<sup>rd</sup>.

"Reopening the government building signifies a very important step for a society that has known nothing but despots and terror, and helps them to take a step towards democracy," Mayville said.

The building, while open, was looted when Saddam Hussein's government officials fled. Official records, vital to any city's grasp of law and order, were in disarray. Much of the mechanical objects that keep a government functioning had been looted or destroyed.

"It's just a massive-scale operation," said Capt. Tom Roughneen, 404<sup>th</sup> Civil Affairs Battalion, who is assigned to the 173<sup>rd</sup>. "It's so hard to guess when it might be normal again. Every day you just have to react to what happens."

"We're going to have to completely rework the function of the government building," Roughneen said. "Right now, I have about 100 to 150 people coming in here daily and their mission has folded up and gone away."

Under the Ba'ath party the building had a different, and far more sinister purpose. Three different ministries once operated inside the building, the Department of Resolution, the Department of People Affairs and the Order of 111.

The Dept. of Resolution is believed to have taken care of the regime's drug smuggling operations and its police-sanctioned auto theft ring.

Permits (and what appear to have been blatant bribes) were required by citizens to build just about anything within Kirkuk and were handled by the Dept. of People Affairs.

The Order of 111 is believed to have facilitated Saddam's efforts to Arabization the region—often by forcefully evicting local, non-Arab residents from their homes, Roughneen explained.

Though many of the returning workers are the same ones who worked in the building under Hussein, their names have been checked through various sources to help ensure they have a clear background.

"They've been antsy to get back to work," Roughneen said about the building workers. "The first day I met them, about a week ago, they just wanted to get back to the job. They didn't care about getting paid they just wanted to get back in here. I think opening the building was a bigger first step to us then it was to them. I know to me it was a milestone to say we got the first group back in their building and in their former offices."

Another of the many challenges that face both the city of Kirkuk and the Brigade is finding workers.

"We're going to ask them to help us go out and find the other city managers of departments that existed outside this building," Roughneen said. "We plan to meet with them and find out if anyone knows somebody who was involved in—let's say payroll or who was a former supervisor in one of these other departments—and we go out and ask them to come back to work."

"This was a socialist economy; the government did everything. The Ministry of Agriculture, for instance, told farmers what to plant where and what to sell at what price. It's going to be a retrenching of the entire economy," Roughneen said.

“The next step has to be defined by the Iraqi people and by the citizens of Kirkuk,” Mayville said. “We’re not here to tell them how to do their business, what we’re here to do is to help them facilitate their success.”

“We do that in a couple of areas. We do it by providing stability and security—by making sure this is a safe place for a democratic process to begin. Secondly, we go in and help them with their basic life support systems—water, electricity, fuel, medical care, and by getting the police department up and running. As a side note, we’re in there helping them to facilitate the democratic process, helping them form committees and delegates. These are all things we’re doing,” Mayville said.

Another challenge, perhaps the most important one according to Ali Salhi, an advisor to Mayville and a chairman of an organization called the Iraqi Free Officer’s and Civilian Movement, is the imminent shortage of oil and gasoline.

“The biggest crisis at this time is the gasoline supply,” Salhi said. “Hopefully we will solve it in a matter of days though. We have been trying to get the word to the public and I think that people are accepting it. They appreciate the fact that we are informing them.”

Salhi, who was a very active opponent of Saddam’s regime, left Kirkuk for the United States in 1976 and is considering throwing his hat into the ring as a mayoral hopeful when elections finally arrive.

“I am very thankful to God for where we are,” he said. “I expected to find 500, maybe a 1,000 bodies in this town. When people complain to me, all I can tell them is you waited in torture for 27 years, can you wait 90 days or 180 days to see what we can do for you. When I tell them that, they run out of questions. There is already a difference, you are free, I tell them. You can park anywhere you want to, walk anywhere you want to, say anything you want to, no one will hurt you for this. This is democracy.”